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ABSTRACT

Intended to provide intense and immediate classroom experiences, tape recording projects of students can take several different forms: (1) unscripted plays and improvised situations (e.g., such "biographies" as "The Life of Charlie MacHerckumdingle: An Awkward Cuss"); (2) plays based on stories or poems (e.g., dramatizations of episodes from "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner"); (3) original scripted plays (e.g., "The Reign of the Rhinoceroses," inspired by a scene from Ionesco's "Rhinoceros"); (4) interviews (e.g., interviewing witnesses to a fire); (5) reading of prose compositions by their student authors; and (6) magazine programs (e.g., vignettes of how people spend their weekends). (MF)

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TAPE RECORDING AND THE END PRODUCT

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LISTENING to a succession of tape recordings made over the years in many different classrooms can be an absorbing experience. One is reminded, much more vividly than one would be in flipping through old essays, of actual moments and actual children. The reminder is salutary when one attempts to take stock and ask what all this activity adds up to.

Before one can judge one must know what one has a right to expect. Certainly the artefacts preserved on my tapes have more meaning and value for me than they would have for an objective listener. But is the artistic and technical perfection of the best BBC programmes the ultimate goal?

Let me describe some of the specimens I have. They can be placed in these main categories: unscripted plays and improvised situations: plays based on stories or poems; scripted plays; interviews; prose composition work; and magazines.

Among the unscripted plays I have two 'biographies'. The first was made by Form 3C at Chadderton Grammar School for Boys and its success inspired me to repeat the idea with Form 4B1 at Ellergreen Comprehensive. Both were boys' forms and neither was very academic. 3C did *The Life of Charlie MacHerckumdingle: An Awkward Cuss*. We followed him through his contrary career, the actors making up the words of each episode lesson by lesson, with the episodes in proper sequence.

On leaving school, Charlie declares: 'I'm not being no rotten accountant; I'm being a pop singer.' 'You're not and that's final!' says dad. Sudden cut to an interview for Charlie with an agent and so much for dad's authority. A boy put on the pop record representing Charlie's group in action and the 'agent' spontaneously killed it with an agonised: 'All right. That's enough, thank you. Start on Saturday.' A comment, surely, on the agent's professional cynicism. Because the music was played aloud and recorded through the mike, the humour of this was shared by the class at the moment of its inception. At the end of his perversely wilful life, Charlie is a cantankerous old man. Age is hard for any child to comprehend and the portrayal of this

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was very superficial. Perhaps the mode we had chosen, however, made depth of insight impossible, and the play, in spite of the witty transitions, was probably too frivolous.

The Life Story of Eustace Ardluck, a chronic victim of misfortune, took 4B1 many weeks to make. They were fourth year leavers surviving from the old secondary modern school into the new comprehensive. They were difficult to motivate, being preoccupied with imminent escape. But they took to tape recording with amazing application. The career of Eustace was traced from the cradle to beyond the grave. The mood was very similar to that of *Charlie* and the shape was something like an aural comic strip. I encouraged this approach because of its entertainment value for the class. Also in the interests of sustaining their enthusiasm, I recorded this story, too, in the correct chronological sequence. Editing would probably have bewildered or bored them.

Several boys took a turn with the linking commentary. The effort of holding in mind a complicated sentence severely taxed them and tedious stretches of rehearsal were required, with usually indifferent results. But the episode when his lordship switched on these lights thereby electrocuting everybody concerned was worth the rehearsing. The best wording to produce the necessary climax had to be hammered out and the class were all involved in planning and waiting for the moment when they were all to make the vital sound effect with their mouths.

'All hold hands . . . and when I say now, I'll switch on these wonderful illuminations. Ready? NOW!' 'Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!'

If the formal commentary was usually stiff, the improvised conversations were lively. The dialogue between Eustace and his gang having a smoke just before accidentally burning down the school had a very authentic ring, as did the inanities of the 'relatives' drooling over the new baby.

One unsatisfactory feature, looking back, is the similarity of *Eustace* to *Charlie*. It is obvious, now, that I must have steered the second project more than is ideally desirable, but idle hands in that form would soon have found a diabolic alternative.

I have half an unscripted play by 3T in the comprehensive. As a class project it did not really justify the time spent on it and was rightly abandoned. I preserve it for the sake of a brilliant solo performance. The play was very largely their work and the plot was evolved a scene at a time.

The theme was a school rebellion provoked by a tyrannical Deputy Head called McKenzie. A boy named Begley, whose written work was dull, ungrammatical and untidy, played this villain in a thick Scottish accent. But his assurance and fluency as he acted were masterly. He began by returning essays to a terrified class: 'Noo larrd! Which way up is this supposed to be?

What's this, larrd? Did ye empty a bottle of ink on it then? Ya needna laugh. His was one o' the best! You didn't do yours, did ye say? What's your excuse? Absent? Absent? That's no excuse.' The unreasoning authoritarian then canes an offender, licks his lips over it like Father Dolan, and is disappointed when the bell goes. I suspect I have in my possession one of the few pieces of school work this boy really enjoyed doing. Certainly he used a gift the normal curriculum does little to develop.

Another unfinished improvised play was the work of 1H. They were a mixed remedial class with a fatuous timetable. For English they found themselves with a motley bunch of teachers most of whom took them for one period only. The children were compulsive talkers, fighters and acrobats. The production of a tape recorder ensured seconds of valuable attention and legitimised the abandoning of desks.

Hearteningly, some of the boys, particularly, were articulate and inventive, and we soon worked out a story about a mixed group of children on a rocky beach having a picnic and a bathe. A girl, a non-swimmer, wanders off and gets lost in a cave. When she is found, she has been captured by escaped convicts. The arrival of the police and the inevitable fight never actually got recorded.

Some of the class took little part but they did at least contribute the hiss and swish of the sea. Thinking was doing for 1H, and to concentrate all the meaning into the voice was too sophisticated a technique. They had to act the play first and even when recording insisted on going through the movements and passing the mike around like a rugger ball. To imagine a cave they had to be in a confined space, and the mike went with them behind the cupboard. But it was a vivid dramatic experience for them so I counted my blessings.

Plays made from stories have a prescribed direction in which to go. The CSE syllabus favours experimentation in method and I used the tape recorder frequently with fifth years taking the examination. I rescued two of these efforts, dramatisations of episodes from *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

One of these scenes was done as a group effort. The form were depleted by this time of the year and we could all squeeze into a small room with curtains. Most were employed as 'crowd', one as governor, one to beat the padded table to make footsteps, one to pant and one to give the hero's thoughts as he ran ahead of the field. Success was ensured by a fine performance by the 'runner', using and adding to Sillitoe's words. In his mind, we flashed back to the scene where the policeman arrives at his home and is confronted by his mother. The boy himself is upstairs and the correct positioning of the mike to create a sense of distance was a necessary technicality, here. The second scene was an individual effort. The form were asked

to write the dialogue at home and the most promising script was subjected to group criticism and improvement. This was important as only two characters were needed and the others had to feel they had a stake in the performance. Juniors are not so perturbed by technical imperfection, but with these seniors I had to take more trouble to ease the suspension of disbelief.

But the prize for the best dramatisation from a story must go to our old friends 4B1. They transposed a section from *Late Night on Watling Street* by Bill Naughton. To a large extent speeches from the original story can be lifted and used, but the boys proved very adept at making up dialogue in keeping with the spirit of the story. At the climax, a vindictive lorry driver brakes suddenly, killing his enemy, a traffic policeman, who is pursuing. For the revving up of the lorry and the throb of the engine in motion, we trailed the mike out through the window to my car. Possibly we spent too much time solving technical problems, but the actual vocal work was a vast improvement on their straight reading.

The specimens I have of completely original scripted plays all come from Form 4T. Two of them were inspired by a scene from Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* which we read and acted. I challenged the pupils to invent a situation of their own in which 'rhinoceritis' or some equally fantastic phenomenon might occur. The setting should be an institution such as a hospital or an army barracks or even a school where there were strictly prescribed rules of conduct. The play was to record the adjustments of the personnel and inmates to this strange and unwelcome catastrophe. I had great qualms as the task promised to be much too difficult. Most of 4T's work lacked sparkle but some at least of this writing, done in groups with the minimum of formality, shows a surprising grasp of dramatic form.

The Reign of the Rhinoceroses by three of the girls takes place in the maternity ward of a hospital. The visiting fathers arrive in time to see their babies turn green and grow large teeth. All one of them can say to his wife is, 'Oh, ain't she lovely. She's the image of you.' The nurses are mainly worried what the sister will say about the mess. Ionesco didn't write in vain, so it seems.

In *The Catastrophe of the Green Flies*, the teachers in a school all change into green flies. To get the 'pupils' to register the impact in a realistic way, it was essential that they should hear the weird music which we had chosen to suggest the transformations. So both music and voices went in through the microphone. Character observation was perfunctory, but the verbal description of the Head, after his transformation, shows grasp of the conventions of the 'radio' form: 'Look at him hanging from the picture rail. He's as content as a baby'.

Interviewing looks easier than it is. In my experience, pupils who can persuade or bully another person into talking in an interesting way are rare. I tried this method as a means of making third year pupils think their way into a scene from *Mr. Polly*. We pretended that we could interview all the participants and witnesses in the episode of the fire. Questioning was unfortunately inept and the answers are facetious. The policeman, for example, is made to say, 'Oh I got here quick, all right. Z Cars 'ave got nothin' on me.'

I was luckier with my First Form interviewer. I divided a mixed ability class into groups and invited one group to imagine they were being interviewed in connection with the Mysterious Happenings at Speke Hall, a local Elizabethan mansion. One girl gives an excellent characterisation of a garrulous chambermaid, thrilled to be in the limelight and tempted into exaggeration. The climax was to have been the introduction of Mrs. Sceptic, who was to have questioned the foregoing claims of all the witnesses. Unfortunately nobody in the group did this well enough and I suppose I could have brought in an actress from another group in the interests of the end product. But then the product would not have been the original group's and the rest of the class had assignments of their own.

With 4B1 the only way around the interview problem was to do it myself. Writing letters of application for an advertised post was something with a relevance obvious even to them. Together we eliminated all the unlikely ones and as prospective employer I interviewed those on the short list. We first formed a general impression of each candidate and then used the tape recorder to refresh our memories of particular things said. Inadequate replies and reckless statements could thus be discussed and revisions suggested.

In another category of recordings in my collection are the voices of children reading their own prose compositions. A mixed Fifth Form doing CSE recorded some letters to the editor of a newspaper on some subject on which they felt strongly. Most of the girls had hardly uttered a word the whole year and to get them to open their mouths would have required a crowbar. Having recently graduated from a girls' secondary modern school they were pathologically shy of the boys. I fell back on taping their letters in what seclusion we could contrive and playing them back anonymously for class consideration. The recordings were pathetic; dull, hurried and so quiet that the magic eye scarcely blinked. Still, at least they spoke.

The magazine programme comprises a diversity of material and permits a wide range of contributors. With at least two of the magazines in my collection the very diversity, taken in conjunction with the shortage of time, made adequate stimulation of each item impossible. Thus in *Christmas with 3S* one year and *Christmas with 3T* the following year there are sentimental

doggerel verses and interviews with a string of yes and no answers. Some interviewees show an irritating compulsion to wisecrack, but a 'convict in Dartmoor' redeemed himself by his closing quip. Having moaned steadily about the prison cooking he was asked why he didn't excape. 'What, and miss me Christmas dinner?' he said.

The magazine I made with 3C of Chadderton was not seasonal and had more time to grow. It was called *Off the Peg* and it was about how some people spend their weekend. Time to prepare took some of the spontaneity out of the interviews, and speeches from the floor in the youth club 'debate' which we overheard lacked controversial animus. A series of talks on hobbies is included, too many for a magazine, really, but worthwhile in themselves. One is by Burgess, a nervous solitary boy. His reading comes in jerks and at great speed and he pauses in all the wrong places. Psychotherapy and a great deal of time would have been needed to improve his talk, but getting him to share his private passion for model theatres at all was epoch-making.

After the talks a 'reporter' pretended to go to Boundary Park to interview a football enthusiast. Crowd noises appropriate to the stages of the game were made by the whole class with great zest. Unfortunately the interviewee slips too easily into the threadbare phraseology of the football commentator: 'The brilliant scheming of Bobby Johnson was a joy to watch.' The link after this was provided by a form 'group' playing guitars: a poor thing, perhaps, but their own. The final item was a good interview with an irascible 'gentleman' who prefers the arm chair and TV of a weekend. The rush of words from this opinionated grumbletonian is an impressive performance. Asked what he thinks of Candid Camera he replies: 'Oh, I think it's terrible, whatever's supposed to be funny in it I can't imagine, making people look ridiculous, kissing women in public houses, it's absolutely preposterous. You know when that disgusting man says, "She's a lovely bit of stuff"? Well damn, says I, damn!' He has a point, though.

That closes my album. By BBC standards it is a mediocre collection. Lack of editing; no proper mixing; conflicting sound levels; lack of rehearsal; no soundproof studio.

My conclusion would be that when tape recording is the aim and purpose of the lesson, the end product needs to be technically competent only so far as is consistent with the creative involvement of as many children as possible. From an educational point of view I cannot deny that the album contains evidence of time badly and frivolously spent. But the best work derives from intense and immediate classroom experience, and in a sense that experience is the real end product for the teacher after all.